DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 617 CE 069 979

AUTHOR Hudson, Shirley A.
TITLE Enhancing Communication Skills in Team Projects.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Education; *Communication Skills; Cooperation; Cooperative Learning; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Competence; Participative Decision Making; *Student Projects; Systems Analysis; *Systems Development; *Teamwork

ABSTRACT

Fifty small businesses and organizations within an 800-mile radius of southern Illinois were surveyed to determine what businesses consider the most important characteristics of a team player; 94 percent responded. These characteristics were incorporated into a course during which teams of students were to complete a project that involved each team analyzing a business system and writing a system proposal. Once the system proposals were accepted, teams wrote programs and tested and ran the system. The project required them to do interviews, pricing (hardware, cabling, networks), and research. Major conflicts were resolved at roundtable discussions. Team members evaluated each other six times during the semester. Instructors summarized feedback and gave them to each team member to enable them to improve their nonparticipation or poor work quality. Open communication was encouraged through brainstorming sessions, open group discussions, and team presentations held by the instructor during the semester. Students were surveyed to see if methods were successful in helping to improve their communication skills. Ninety-one students were surveyed in the spring of 1992, 1993, and 1994. Findings indicated team projects could enhance communication. (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

CE

ED 387 617

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN TEAM PROJECTS

Shirley A. Hudson, Assistant Professor
College of Technical Careers
Information Management Systems
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
Carbondale, Illinois

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S A Hudson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Shirley Hudson, CTC/IMS MC:6614, Carbondale, Illinois 62901-6614

CE 069 579

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Enhancing Communication Skills In Team Projects

INTRODUCTION

Students must be able to demonstrate that they can perform on the job. According to Busse (1992), "If students prepare themselves for the new workplace environment while they're still in school, they can gain a competitive advantage" (p.25). This involves not only knowledge and technical skill, but team work skills. Being an effective team member is more important than ever as companies move to team environments. In the new workplace employees are being asked to participate in the organization's vision, goals and strategies for improving operations and organizational systems. This three year study addressed methods used in a college classroom setting to enhance communication skills in team projects.

Active participation in team projects provided opportunities for students to communicate with their peers to resolve issues, solve problems, and overcome some barriers. Information Management Systems majors studying to be system analyst were given this opportunity. Team concepts were integrated into the course to facilitate team work skills, as well as, communication skills.

In an educational setting where team projects are shown to be a positive learning experience, essential skills needed in the 21st century workforce are being addressed to help students gain a competitive edge. A survey was taken of 50 small businesses and organizations within a 800 mile radius of southern Illinois; 94% responded. The survey was conducted to determine what businesses consider to be the most important characteristics of a team member. Respondents were asked to used the Likert ratings on a four-point scale (1 = not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = important, and 4 = very

important). Analyses were done on the data. Out of fourteen choices the top characteristics and their mean were; Communications with 3.7. Three of the characteristics had a means of 3.6: (1) Ability to listen to the contributions of others; (2) Ability to speak openly to express ideas, opinions, disagreement and feelings, and (3) Ability to work and resolve conflicts quickly and constructively.

The survey revealed communications as a key component in all characteristics. Wellins (1992), stated "Companies that are moving to self-directed teams must select work-forces that are equipped with-or capable of acquiring-the competencies, skills, and values necessary for successful performance in high-involvement organizations" (p. 26). While students maybe taught communication skills in earlier schooling, they must continue to improve communication and team work skills during their educational process.

Laird (1985), stated "As civilization moves toward increased emphasis on human rights, so organizations are moving toward sharper focus on developing the human potential" (p. 33). This development involves diversity and team dynamics. Education must work with industries to train workers of the 21st century. Therefore, understanding the characteristics of skills needed in the workplace can help instructors to incorporate and strengthen required skills into their courses.

Team Process

According to Wellins (1992), "One successful strategy for creating an empowered work culture is the use of self-directed teams". He defines a self-directed team as a "... small groups of employees who have day-to-day responsibility for managing themselves

and their work" (p.24). Teams were given the day-to-day responsibility of organizing team activities, and solving all team problems, while meeting deadlines. In some cases attitude adjustments were necessary for some members to work effectively with other team members.

Team projects were to be completed by the end of the semester, requiring teams to set deadlines for themselves during the semester. The project involved analyzing a business system and writing a system proposal. The proposal could be for a new system or to improve an existing system. Once the system proposals were accepted, teams wrote programs, tested and ran the system. The project required them to do interviews, pricing (hardware, cabling, networks, etc) and research.

According to Hoevemeyer (1993), "Team members should be committed to establishing team goals, measuring progress toward them, and attaining them" (p. 69). Team developments were an on-going process during the semester. Roles of each member were important. Leaders had to be strong, able to communicate, coordinate and direct the team to its goals. Team members set goals and standards for their team. Members understood their contributions to the team were important to attain the goals and standards. Each team chose a consultant the person who consulted with the instructor. To encourage and strengthen team interaction consultants were the only person who could bring problems to the instructor.

When a team had a major conflict they could not solve, they were called in by the instructor. Round table discussion were held. According to McFarland (1992), "The cooperative approach requires that everyone contribute to the resolution of an issue"

(p. 46). All team members were asked to contribute to a solution. McFarland stated, "Passive students are not likely to invest anything of themselves in the problem-solving process, which may mean they'll have little commitment to see a project through" (p. 27). This situation was observed by the instructor and team members were encouraged to continue with or without that member. Instructors must keep a close eye on teams progress and make adjustments when needed. There were times when some passive team member could not be reached, but efforts to encourage them were continued.

Open communication and team members' evaluation during the semester played an important role in how well teams pull together during conflicts. Team members evaluated each other six times during the semester. The evaluation sheets gave members an opportunity to rate members performance. Comment sections were provide for written comments. This provided a way for the instructor to have feedback on members progress during the semester. Feedbacks were summarized and given to each team member. This gave them a change to improve their non-participation or poor work quality. If they continued not to improve they did so knowing that it would effective their grade. The instructor also sit in on team meeting during the semester to observe each team.

When students work independently they did not have to worry about the ideas of others. In a team setting where four or five members expressed different ideas, members were required to give consideration to those ideas. Teams were able to complete difficult task when members were committed and actively participated. During the semester members were encouraged to talk to one another to clarify misunderstandings

and eliminate confusion. Team members were to show respect for one another, and allow each member to express ideas and exchange view points. Situation of this type were a big challenge for some team members.

The key is to keep open communication between team members. Brainstorming sessions, open group discussions, and team presentations were held by the instructor during the semester. Teams learned from each other by sharing ideas, resolving issues, and solving problems. Team presentations provided another way for members to practice and improve communication skill.

STUDENTS SURVEY

Students were surveyed to see if methods used were successful in helping to improve their communication skills. Ninety-one students were surveyed in the Spring of 1992, 1993, and 1994 with a 88%, 97%, and 96% return respectively. Students were asked the following, "Do you feel being able to speak openly in team meetings helped your team to resolve conflicts?" 1992 students responded: 89% Yes and 11% No. 1993 students responded: 91% Yes and 9% No. 1994 students responded 92% Yes and 8% No. "Were inter-group workings and sharing of ideas with other team members a beneficial learning experience?" 1992 students responded: 89% Yes and 11% No. 1993 students responded: 94% Yes and 6% No. 1994 students responded 95% Yes and 5% No. When asked, "Was the limited scope of the project in this setting sufficient to stimulate learning?" 1992 students responded: 89% Yes and 11% No. 1993 students responded: 94% Yes and 6% No. 1994 students responded 95% Yes and 5% No (See Table 1).

Table 1 STUDENTS SURVEY

		1992		1993		1994
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
Speaking Openly	89%	11%	91%	9%	92%	8%
Inter-group Sharing	89%	11%	94%	6%	95%	5%
Stimulate Learning	89%	11%	94%	6%	95%	5%

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS. Team projects can enhance communication when members are given the full responsibility of all day-to-day team activities. Team members must be encouraged to resolve day-to-day issues, and problems within the team. The process helps to strengthen and enhance communication skills. Team projects calls for close monitoring by the instructor. Keeping in mind what McFarland said about the passive students, when this situation occurs instructors must be flexible and make adjustments to help those members who want to succeed. Efforts should be continued to reach passive member. Sometimes you will succeed in helping them understand the benefits of the experience. However, there are times when the problem or problems maybe beyond the scope of the class.

Wellins (1992) stated, "Simulations provide a unique and highly accurate method of measuring job potential" (p. 27). Therefore, the benefits students receive from team projects out-weigh the negatives. Students must be empowered with the skills needed to make them competitive in the job market. Open communication in team projects, student evaluations, continued feedback, and team presentations can be both challenging and rewarding for students.

REFERENCES

Busse, R. (1992) The new basics. Vocational Educational Journal, 67(5), 24-25, 47.

Hoevemeyer, V. A. (1993) How effective is your team? Training & Development, 47(9), 67-71.

Laid, D. (1985) Approaches to training and development. Reading MA; Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

McFarland, W. P. (1992) Meeting of the minds. Vocational Education Journal, 67(5), 26-27, 46.

Wellins, R. S. (1992) Building a self-directed work team. Training & Development, 46(12), 24-28.